

## INTRODUCTION

Good morning church! How are you all feeling today? Perhaps some (like I am) are rejoicing that the we finally got to the start of the school holidays. Or for some others summer holidays or not, it doesn't make a difference, it's the same routine everyday, just that in summer there are more daylight hours to enjoy a day. Wherever you are at today, I just want to say that I am glad that you have chosen to be here together with us all, praising and honouring God. It has been another year marked by Covid, school closures, restrictions, more restrictions, getting within sight of the finish line, and then seeing it all slip away within a span of 2 weeks. The colour chart of the Netherlands turned from a nice spring green to a deep bordeaux colour. Dark red is fine if you are a glass of wine, but not if you are a country trying to get out of the grip of the Covid virus. Understandably, we are all tired. So I hope that our passage today will give us the motivation going into the summer months to continue to run the race set out before us, keeping our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus. May we never let our faith slip away from us when we get so close to the finish line. [Alright, that was the "preachy" part of my personal

reflections, sparked off by recent events.] One of the ways that help us in running this race, is to stay in the word. So let's get to the Word quickly, bibles ready.

Two months ago, I preached on Isaiah 6. I focused on our view of God and how that affects our reaction to him for what he has done for us. Today, we will also have a view of God, this time in the New Testament, through the eyes of people who saw him. Jesus Christ - God in flesh.

For that we turn to another chapter 6, John chapter 6 which was read for us earlier in the service. For today, we will be focusing just on the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. John 6:1-15. This is a familiar story. If you grew up in church, you would probably have heard the story about the boy who gave the 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish to Jesus and Jesus used that to feed 5000 people. If you have systematically going through the bible in a year, you would have read it couple of times, first in the gospel of Matthew, and when you come to the gospel of Mark, you will go, this story sounds familiar haven't I read it before somewhere. In Luke, you get the same deja vu feeling and by the time you come to the gospel of John, you know the story by heart. It's no surprise, we know the story well. What you

may not know, is that this the only specific miracle of Jesus, that is recorded in all the 4 gospels. You can find this story in Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, and John 6.

So rather have us flip between all 4 gospel accounts, I thought it would be helpful if I drew out the salient points in each of the gospel accounts and put them into one story. So here is the complete story synthesised from all 4 gospel accounts, drawn from the NIV, ESV, and the RSV bible translations, and recounted in technicolour, and surround sound. As I re-tell this story, try to see if you can identify a particular situation, an emotion, or a reaction by the characters in the story which speaks directly to you. Ok?

John the Baptist has been beheaded by King Herod. John the Baptist is a relative of Jesus, not only some relative, he was a close relative. When Jesus hears about John's death, he withdraws privately to a solitary place. I imagine that he was in mourning, and I can imagine that having the paparazzi pressing around you asking you to look this way, smile for the camera, heal this lame man while our cameras are rolling, it doesn't quite help with that mourning process. So Matthew tells us that Jesus goes off to a solitary place. Even though he is God, he still

needs that time alone to process and to mourn. In all this time, Jesus and his disciples have been so busy with doing ministry, with helping others that Mark tells us that they didn't even have time to eat. Jesus and his friends were running low on nourishment, both physical and psychological. But even in that state of being, when Jesus was chased by the crowds all the way to Bethsaida (that is a town on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee), when He saw all the people coming, he had compassion on them and Luke tells us that Jesus welcomed them, taught them about God, and healed those in need of healing.

Now it was getting late and the disciples come to Jesus to ask him to send the crowd away to the surrounding towns so that they could go find food and lodging. I can imagine that the disciples were also tired. They have been working all day and looking forward to the end of their workday. But Jesus tells the disciples: "You give them something to eat." Philip is asked by Jesus where they can go buy bread to feed the people but Jesus does that only to test Philip for Jesus already knew what he was going to do. Philip answers that 200 denarii would not even be enough give each person a little bit of bread.

I pause the story here for a little side note. Philip comes from Bethsaida, so he should know the place better than any of the other disciples, which was likely to be the reason why Jesus directed the question at him. Philip must have felt like he was put on the spot by the Master. Some people are critical of Philip for his lack of faith. I mean, this is Jesus standing before him. The same Jesus that Philip has seen calming the storm with a single word, healing multitudes of people, and turning water into wine. Does Philip still not get it? Others have called Philip a bean-counter. I'd like to give Philip some slack. Look, he is tired and hungry. Physiologically you are not at your best when you are tired. We mothers love our children dearly but I don't know any mother who have never screamed at their kids. Mothers are the most tired people on the face of the earth! =)

I don't know what you do when you are tired and hungry but chances are, you are not at your best. So Philip is tired and hungry and he feels like all eyes are upon him to come up with a solution to a mega issue which cannot be solved. We know we have God in our lives, we know he is all powerful and all-able and ready to help us even in situations where we think that a solution cannot be found. Have we always have had enough faith that God can solve our problems? So Philip is the practical

bean-counter. He does the sums in his head and decides that practically, this was not going to work, without realising that Jesus was not asking him to get the money for the bread. Jesus was simply asking him where to find the bread. Philip was already thinking (or should I say, worrying) 2 steps ahead of Jesus. My husband's also a sort of bean-counter for his company and sometimes the practicality in his decision-making just drives me absolutely crazy. I got my husband's permission to share this story with you as an example of how I imagine someone like Philip thinks. When Joan and I were in our early days of dating, we had a date to go out somewhere. But I fell ill. In Singapore where I come from, I was almost never ill. Well never ill enough to not be able to go out. So I call Joan, to tell him: "I can't go out tonight because I am ill". In my mind, I am thinking, he is going to say: "Oh you poor thing. It's ok, we don't have to go out, I will come and visit you". Instead, this is what he said: "Oh, if you are so ill, then I better not come and visit you in case I get also infected." (Eh-huh, this was when we were dating and supposedly in-love)

Here you see how the practical considerations trump all other considerations in the decision-making process? Boyfriends, I strongly suggest to you NOT to say such things to your

girlfriends when she is ill, even if you may actually be thinking that.

But we thank God for the bean-counters in our midst because without them we will plunge right into a project and then realise halfway through, that we are short of resources to finish the project well. So I think we can be a little bit more sympathetic and understanding towards Philip, considering his innate character and his circumstances. But that doesn't mean that Philip actually did the right thing in that situation. He made 2 errors: 1) He misunderstood what God required of him at that moment; and 2) Because he was so focused on everything else around him and trying on his own to come to solution to the problem, he forgot who was standing in front of him.

Back to the story. Where were we? Yes, it will cost 200 denarii to buy just a little bit of bread for the whole crowd. The NIV translation informs us that 200 denarii is a man's wages for 8 months. Jesus then tells them to go see what they can rustle up. Andrew finds a boy with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. Jesus instructs the disciples to get the crowd to sit down in groups of 50s to 100s and then in the sight of everyone there, he took the bread and fish, looked up to heaven, blessed the food, broke

the loaves and gave them to the disciples to distribute among the people. After a long hard day's work when the disciples were hoping to finally be able to rest, they were told to do some more work in serving others. Can anyone identify with that? Everyone ate and was satisfied. Then Jesus told his disciples to gather up all the leftover broken pieces so that nothing would be wasted. The disciples had to serve dinner and then clean up also after that! Can anyone now identify with that? The disciples gathered in 12 baskets of broken pieces. Each of them had one basket full.

The result of this was that the crowd saw this miraculous sign and that impacted them so much that they said that this must be the Prophet that was come. (This is the Prophet that Moses talked about in Deu 18.) But Jesus knowing that the crowd intended to come and take him by force to make him king, withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

I am in the middle of my sermon, I know nobody does that, but I want to stop just a moment to pray. Can I do that?

[PRAYER] Father, may your words, preserved through so many hands and passed down through so many generations



Speak to us today, and change us from the inside out. Holy Spirit come and show us what you want to tell each of us today.

Amen.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 takes place in the Gospel of John in between a series of recorded miracles. Before this, John records the healing of the official's son in chapter 4, in chapter 5 the healing of the man lame for 38 years. After this feeding miracle in chapter 6, John records the miracle of Jesus walking on water. You may have been taught previously that each of the 4 gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written in first instance for a specific group of people and for a specific purpose. We don't have to guess John's purpose for writing his Gospel of John because he gives it to us clearly in John 20:30-31. What does it say?

Jn 20: 30-31: "Now Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written **so that** you may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

This is the driving purpose of John's Gospel: that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, but it doesn't end there (Satan

also believes that Jesus is the Christ) and by believing, you may have life in his name.

I will not be doing a verse by verse exposition of our bible passage today. Sorry if you were expecting that. Even I get bored using the same methodology all the time. In the time that I have left, I want to make the main point the main point. The reason John records this miracle is so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ. And this is the gospel: Jesus is God in flesh who has come into our realm, as the 2nd Adam, to put right what the 1st Adam did wrong (with all the bad consequences that followed after). Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross to bear all the sins of the world, past, present, and future. For the wages of sin is death, and justice demands that there be payment for all wrongdoing. Only the sacrifice from a perfectly sinless man could satisfy this justice of God; and only the love of God could cause God himself, in the person of Jesus, to step into our shoes, to take on our penalty of death on himself. If you have never chewed on that thought, stop now for a moment to chew on it.

For the rest of us, these things were written so that by believing, we may may have life in Jesus' name. What does that

mean “life in Jesus’ name”? On an overarching level, John means eternal life (Jn 3:16). But elsewhere, John also quotes Jesus saying that the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy but I have come so that they may have abundant life (Jn 10:10). That abundant life encompasses our current life on this earth.

However, by “abundant life” I don’t think John means just enjoying the material comforts of life on earth. Enjoying material comfort could be part of that life but it should always lead us back to thankfulness, gratefulness, and at the end of the day, worship. Just like in the great hymn that we often use in our doxology: Praise God from whom all  **blessings**  flow, praise him all creatures here below. Our earthly blessings should always lead us back towards giving God praise and worship. If it’s not just material blessings, then what  **is**  abundant life? Abundant life in his name means living a life in the manner and for the purpose that he made you for; with a joy that comes in spite of your circumstances and recognising at every step of the way that it is God who is working through you to enable you to fulfil your purpose.

A couple of years ago, our church organised a week-long Holiday Bible Club with the theme “Who Do You Say I Am?” At the closing service, we handed out these armbands. For those

who have it, it's time to wave your armbands in front of your camera! Our bible club's theme "Who do you say I am" came from the question that Jesus asked his disciples. Our answer to the question that Jesus posed is crucial for understanding the magnitude of what he has done on the cross for us, which in turn affects our reaction towards him. Similarly, the actions of the people crowding around Jesus in our miracle story is very much reflective of how they viewed Jesus.

How many characters were there in the story? The crowd. From Matthew's account, we know that that included women and children. The crowd must have also included the sick and people who needed healing. There were the disciples; the boy. 2 named disciples: Philip and Andrew. How did these people view Jesus and perhaps more importantly, with which of these people would you identify with? Are you seeking physical healing from Jesus or hoping to get some benefit from Jesus? Have you come to Jesus because you were following your spouse? In those times, the women and children would certainly not be gallivanting through the countryside if their husbands were not with them. Have you come to Jesus because your parents were part of the crowd? Or do you identify with the disciples, often feeling overworked and underfed? Or do you

feel like the boy, worried because he has given up all he has left to eat to Jesus? Or do you feel like Philip who felt he was asked by Jesus to do the impossible?

To most of the crowd, Jesus had a response. He knew that the crowd had the wrong view of him. (V.15). They wanted him to be their physical king, their champion provider. But He wanted them to have him as king in their hearts. In John 6:26 he shows the crowd where their heart is. He says: You are looking for me because you ate the loaves and had your fill. In other words, they seek Jesus for the health and blessings that he provides and not Him. We know that to be true because in John 6:66, we are told that when the going got tough, many of Jesus' followers left him.

Let's be honest with ourselves today and ask: why are we following Jesus? What if God does a Job on us? You know Job's story, he lost his wealth and his children all in one day, and his health too shortly after. If God does a Job on us, will we turn bitter and angry at God, or will we still fall to the ground in worship and say like Job did: "Naked I come, and naked I will go, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." I hope for all of us here that none of us will

ever have to go through all that Job went through, but I pray for us too that if that does happen, that the Lord will give us the strength and faith to go through it.

As for those identifying with the women and children, your faith cannot be your spouses' faith, or your parents' faith, or your culture's faith. I was once in a conversation with an African lady talking about the importance of church life for her and her children, and she said to me very matter-of-factly, "We are from Ghana and we go to church on Sundays." I thought that was an interesting comment and I had to think about it to try understand what she meant by that. 50 years ago, if you asked just about any caucasian Dutch person if they were Christian, they would reply that they have been entered on the register of their local church since they were babies, of course they are Christians. I am not trying to bash any culture or people group, I am just trying to emphasise that there are no culture christians, no people-group christians, no family christians, no denominational christians. There are only Jesus Christians. This is exactly why John the Baptist said to the Jews: Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. We do not become a member of God's family by natural or cultural

descent but rather by responding personally to God. Who do **you** say He is?

Or do you feel like Philip, faced with a task of such magnitude you don't even know where to begin. Do not make the 2 errors he did: understand what God is requiring of you at this moment and not tangle yourself up with worry with what could be happening 2 steps ahead. God knows what he will be doing. (v.6) You don't. And do not lose sight of the fact, like Philip did, that God himself is with you.

Finally for those who identify with the fatigue of the disciples, and the sacrifice the boy gave by offering up all the food he had, I have a word of encouragement for you. God sees. Jesus ensured that there were 12 baskets full of bread left over for the disciples. Could it just be a mere coincidence, 12 baskets of bread for 12 disciples? Bread represents sustenance, nourishment, and even Christ himself. Jesus says in 6:35, I am the Bread of Life. For those labour at His work, Jesus not only sustains and nourishes us, He also gives his very self to us. I cannot imagine a greater reward than that. In the words of this simple but o-so-lovely worship song:

In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus, you can have all this world but give me Jesus. When I am alone, give me Jesus, You can have all this world but give me Jesus. When I come to die, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus.

These are written, and said, **so that** you may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have **life** in his name. Amen.

For those who will be on summer holidays, have a wonderful time!